



The Micro Gardener

'Making it Easy to Grow Good Health'

How to Make Your Own Italian Herbs Blend

Growing a culinary herb garden has lots of advantages. Common kitchen herbs add flavour, digestive enzymes and nutrition to meals. You can also use fresh herbs as medicine and preserve as dried herbs for long term use in the pantry. One of the easiest ways to save money but not compromise flavour is to grow and dry your surplus herbs. Most herbs last well when dried and stored in a cool, dark place (ideally in glass).

If you enjoy cooking and use Italian Herb seasoning regularly, why not consider making your own blend. It's easy and free if you grow a few easy herbs in a pot.

Mother of Herbs

I use Mother of Herbs (*Plectranthus amboinicus*) as the basis for this versatile herb blend. Also known as Five Seasons Herb, Five in One Herb, Five Spice Herb, Queen of Herbs, All-herb, All Purpose Herb, Country Borage, Indian Borage, Spanish Thyme, Spanish Sage, Broad Leafed Thyme and Chinese Three in One. The names in themselves tell you so much about the wonderful flavours! Knowing how to substitute herbs in cooking is a skill and this particular herb is incredibly versatile. Just one or two fresh leaves added to dishes really makes the flavour pop.



Mother of Herbs has a pungent distinctly Mediterranean herb aroma. It has a strong hint of **oregano** and **marjoram**, with a lesser note of **thyme**, **savory** and **sage**. So, it's a great base *all in one leaf* to start with these flavours. If you rub, crush or chop the leaf, the essential oils are released into the food and highly aromatic.

Mother of Herbs grows and spreads quickly if planted in the ground (especially with moist soil). It tends to cascade downwards if grown in pots but long attractive flower spikes grow upwards. It is a very low-maintenance plant that rarely needs watering and will sit quietly never demanding your attention! It will quickly spread out filling a pot or area with good rainfall when it may sprawl over neighbouring plants! For this reason, it is ideal to plant around taller shrubs and trees. Give Mother of Herbs a regular haircut if it becomes unruly.

The variegated leaf variety has pretty creamy white edges (above) and is not as vigorous as the plain green variety (right). This is because the variegated species do not photosynthesize as efficiently.

A few of its many uses:

- Drought hardy ground cover and compost ingredient.
- Weed suppressant living mulch.
- 'Chop and drop' mulch with long-lasting fragrant leaves and stems.
- The strongly scented leaves may help deter pest insects.
- Beneficial insect attractant (when white and pale pink flowers appear en masse, these insects feed on the nectar and pollen).



- As a companion plant planted under fruit trees and food forest gardens. Helps shade roots without competing for nutrients as it is a succulent and has very shallow roots. Flowers attract bees and other pollinators to improve pollination and harvests.
- As an attractive, fast-growing border or space filler and feature plant.
- As a temporary low-maintenance ground cover over summer to prevent weeds growing in unused garden beds. It keeps microbes alive without robbing soil of nutrients – a kind of ‘care taker’ plant.
- A beautiful flowering herb in pots, rockeries and hanging baskets.

Starting to appreciate the value of this plant? I’m sure you can find a use for it! You’ll have plenty of leaves for drying to make your herb blends. Mother of Herbs is especially useful if you have limited space for a herb garden and want a time-saver. You only need to add parsley, basil and rosemary to make the Italian Herb mix.

Italian Herbs Seasoning Blend

- 🌿 4 tablespoons Mother of Herbs
- 🌿 1 tablespoon Sweet or Perennial Basil
- 🌿 1 tablespoon Parsley
- 🌿 1 tablespoon Rosemary



How to Make Italian Dried Herbs

When selecting your herbs from the garden, try to **choose sprigs with similar sized leaves so they dry evenly**. Wash the leaves and remove any that are damaged. Then use a salad spinner or pat **dry your fresh herbs** between paper towels or a clean tea towel. You want to *dry* rather than *steam* them!

Fine leaved herbs like **parsley, basil and rosemary don’t take long to dry**. However, Mother of Herbs has a thick fleshy leaf. If you want to dry all your herbs at once rather than individually in batches, I find **it’s quicker to finely chop this herb before drying**. Sprinkle the chopped herb onto a lined oven tray (with the other herb leaves). **Spread the herbs out, including stems in a single layer** across a baking sheet. **Avoid overlapping** them to encourage air to circulate between the leaves. This speeds up the process.

Whilst you can use a food dehydrator, it’s just as quick to dry them on an oven tray in a cool oven (80-90°C). You can even take advantage of the embodied heat inside when you turn the oven off after cooking. This is often enough heat to dry them without burning (or extra electricity). Every oven is different so test what works for you! **Position the herbs on a tray on the centre oven rack away from hot spots**. This low temperature is for a conventional oven. If you use convection with a fan, you may need to adjust the temperature slightly as ovens vary. It takes me around 15 minutes to air dry herbs this way + around 30-40 minutes cooling time afterwards.



Once your herbs are crisp and dried, crumble or chop them up further. Add to a small glass jar and shake well to mix. Label and you’re ready to use homemade dried Italian Herbs. Dried Mother of Herbs can also be used as a herb sprinkle on its own over meals at the table, used as a salt substitute, in herb butter or to make tasty salad dressings and marinades.

Even if you only have the one herb, Mother of Herbs, I’ve found it works well as a standalone ingredient for adding to casseroles, soups, sauces (especially homemade tomato sauce), gravy, stuffing, rissoles, vegetables, roasts, savoury dishes with eggs, seasoning and much more. A little goes a long way!

What a blessing this herb is to grow in the garden for health and flavour. Enjoy experimenting in your kitchen.♥